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Anxiety center helps travelers beat fear of flying

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Phobias are bullies, and the fear of flying is a tough one.

This is what I learned when I talked to **Dr. Martin Seif**, a psychologist, and two people who had not flown in years before taking a class in overcoming their fears. Justin Tolbert of Yonkers had flown a lot as a kid, but had been unnerved nine years ago by a severely turbulent flight home from college in Atlanta. After that, he made his trips back and forth to school "on Greyhound, driving, Amtrak, you name it," the 27-year-old said.

Andrea Cerone developed a fear of flying 17 years ago. Why?

"I have no idea," the 41-year-old Port Chester woman said. It wasn't just airplanes, it was elevators and trains, too.

But Tolbert and Cerone had recently taken a flight to Boston and back as part of a class dealing with their fears. The Freedom to Fly Workshop is offered at the Anxiety & Phobia Treatment Center at White Plains Hospital Center. Seif is the center's associate director.

Cerone's experience is common, Seif said. You may hear that flying is one of the safest ways to travel, and that information is part of the course, but that doesn't always address the issue. Often the fear of flying is actually mostly claustrophobia.

"Crashing and terrorism — none of that even entered my mind," Cerone said. "It doesn't concern me. If it's my time, it's my time to go."

But being sealed in an airplane and not in control scared her.

Some, of course, do fear they'll crash. Throw in fear of heights, social anxieties and that lack of control (unseen pilots fly the plane, not you) and it's easy to see how a person could become uneasy.

"The concept of flying is very ripe for phobias," Seif said.

And phobias put on a convincing show.

"Your mind is bluffing you into believing that it's more dangerous than it really is," Tolbert said, explaining what he'd learned.

Seif said the "active ingredient" in conquering fear is exposure to what scares you. So the class meets for six weeks at Westchester County Airport. Each week, they enter an airplane on the ground. Some people have difficulty stepping on the first time.

"There are some people who just aren't prepared for the surge of anxiety when they get on the plane," Seif said. The students — there were 15 in the class that just ended — face their fears in "manageable steps," he said.

Tolbert had flown frequently when younger, to California, Mexico and to visit family on St. Croix. He was tired of missing out on the places he could be going. Cerone's sister bought a Florida vacation home, and she also hoped to go with her boyfriend, Steve Fretterd, to visit his brother near Anaheim, Calif.

They flew to Boston and back after the fifth class. The course also comes with individual counseling, and the students' counselors — most of whom had overcome their own phobias before joining the center's staff — went with them on the flight. That gave them a strong dose of reassurance. Their flight out went well, but the ride back was bumpier.

"My stomach was flipping a little bit," Cerone said.

Tolbert employed tactics they'd taught him to occupy your mind. Count back from 100 by 3s, or make an alphabetical list of boy's names; "A is for Adam, B is for Blake," and so on.

When they met with me after the flight, in a room that the hospital set aside for us, Tolbert and Cerone described completion of the round trip as a major event, "awesome" for Cerone and "a joyous occasion " for Tolbert.

They and their classmates got along well, they said. They had exchanged e-mail addresses and some were talking about taking flights together, Tolbert said.

Cerone is planning to fly with her sister to the vacation home in January. Meanwhile, she and Fretterd took Metro-North to Manhattan recently and she felt comfortable enough to sleep, she said.

Literally, the world has opened up for them and they are thrilled with the program.

"My ultimate goal is Hawaii," Cerone said.

Tolbert's plans were less specific, but grander.

"I just want to go any and everywhere," he said.

Additional Facts

More information

The Anxiety and Phobia Treatment Center can be reached at 914-681-1038, or visit www.phobia-anxiety.org.
